

TO: Governor
FROM: John Arledge
DATE: 9/28/04
SUBJECT: Education
CC: CVW

In recent weeks as we have begun planning our messages for the remainder of the year and the next legislative session, you have mentioned two things that have troubled me. One was that you did not think that education should be our top priority during the 2005 Session, and the second was that you thought we should seek a smaller rather than larger education package.

I respectfully disagree on both points. "Momentum Mississippi," "Operation: Streamline II," and an "Education Reform Act" would be a strong legislative offering and a good package of messages for 2005. However, I think that we should clearly lead with education for several reasons:

We can't lose on education. It was important for you during the campaign to attempt to at least tie with Musgrove on education. Education is a prime area where Democrats can pull white voters. That remains the case.

Because of the circumstances surrounding the education budget, you have already begun to be painted with the “anti-education” brush. We cannot let that impression stand. We must change it now before it sets.

Jobs and the budget are important internally.

Education is important externally. While I agree that it is vitally important that we fix the budget problem and produce more jobs, I believe those can be achieved internally without public appeals (other than arguing against a tax increase). We will probably need one 1,000+ economic development project, several 500+ projects or good four-year job growth numbers to reach critical mass with voters on job creation performance. On the budget we will need revenue growth and some semblance of structural balance. In other words, it will take numbers, not rhetoric to get credit on jobs and the budget in '07. It will take rhetoric when it comes to education.

We need an issue that exhibits compassion.

While our opposition has attacked us on Medicaid, our messages this year have been jobs, the budget and tort reform. While this is certainly a classic Dem/Rep dynamic, our issues have nonetheless been very clinical. We need to highlight an issue that exhibits compassion. In light of the water we have taken on during the Medicaid debate,

focusing on education would highlight your softer side and help with women.

We need to be aggressive on education to help insulate us from the taxes vs. children debate to come.

It is a virtually certainty that the opposition will propose tax hikes for education next year. It is going to be a difficult tightrope to walk to argue against the tax increases without appearing to be anti-education. With this in mind, it is important for us to insulate you on the issue. The best way to do that is to lead with an aggressive education package.

“Education reform” will steal some ink from “education funding.”

During the 1995 gubernatorial campaign we anticipated that Molpus would attempt to win white voters by focusing on Governor Fordice’s veto of education funding bills. To combat this we launched the PRIME Initiative (People’s Right to Initiate Model Education) as a diversion (it proposed giving communities the ability to vote to pull out from under the SDE). Molpus took the bait and spent his entire campaign arguing the merits of PRIME instead of debating Governor Fordice’s hostile stance on education funding. The only thing the voters took from the debate was that Governor

Fordice cared enough to have an education plan and that was good enough. The point is that the larger, more comprehensive we make our education proposal, the more attention it draws away from the funding debate. We win when the debate is about reforms and not money. Yes, a larger education proposal will make it harder to pass in the Legislature, but this is one issue where a loss would not hurt you.

Education reform is trending just like tort reform did.

We saw tort reform go from grassroots meetings to legislative support in just a few years. The same is happening with education reform. Sensing that something big is at hand in education, several education groups are meeting around the state this off season. If we get out in front of this parade early, we might be able to direct the band down a road of our choosing and take credit.

Mississippians are ready for a Republican vision of education.

I have long argued that Republicans can win on education in Mississippi. Over the last 12 years I have watched the poll numbers for conservative education reforms grow stronger and stronger. Indeed our latest polling bears that out. We should begin an education initiative in 2005 because it may take two sessions to complete and the '07 Session -- like most election-year

sessions -- will likely be unproductive. I believe that passing some or all of a comprehensive education reform package would be the last piece of an impressive reelection message:

- Pulled the State out of a \$700 million budget hole – with no tax increases
- Saved \$XXX million in taxpayer dollars through “Operation: Streamline” measures
- Created XX,XXX new jobs since January 2004.
- Passed significant tort reform
- Landed a major economic development project
- Passed a major Education Reform Act

The Medicaid issue has certainly been problematic and should be handled with care for the rest of your first term (especially as we begin the redetermination process which is probably even more dangerous than the PLADs transition). However, it does not concern me as much as education. We are off to a good start so far this fall, but we have a lot of work to do in this area. I look forward to meeting with you soon on the subject.